



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Reverend Matthew J. Moretz, *Associate Rector*

Lady Wisdom's Invitation

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 19, 2018

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Proverbs 9:1-6, Psalm 34:9-14, Ephesians 5:15-20, John 6:51-58

“You that are simple, turn in here! Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine that I have mixed. Lay aside your simple ways and live, and walk in the ways of insight.”

These are the words of Lady Wisdom. The One who, in the Book of Proverbs, brings to life the welcome that God has for all those who will come. The book sets the scene of a Lady, the head of a great household, one with an impressive seven pillars. She has a feast tonight! Her table is set. She has made ready the bread and the wine and the roast beast. She is ready for us. And she sends out her servant-girls to surmount the highest places in town to proclaim her invitation—as public an invitation as you could offer. She doesn't require anything that you would usually expect of a guest at a grand banquet. No formal attire. No need to wash up. “Come as you are.” No prerequisite to be of a certain party or religion or social class. No need to be a member. Her banquet is for all, if they would but accept the invitation. It seems that there is a prerequisite for this banquet though. Hear this invitation like no other! “You that are simple, turn in here!” At first glance this seems backhanded and sounds like Lady Wisdom is throwing major shade. “Step right in. Simpletons only!” Why would anyone accept such an invitation, one which, if accepted, practically insults you.

But if you could look past the slight, to the heart of her invitation, you would see that she speaks the truth, however much it may sting. She offers us more than our simple daily bread, yearning to give us so much more than that. Yearning to dine with us at her great feast, the likes of which will overwhelm our senses and our bellies. If you only could look past the slight, to the truth of her invitation: that without Her, we are simple, we are less than we could be, we are hungry. If you only could admit that you don't have it all figured out, that you need something and someone larger than yourself, someone who takes you beyond your simple ways to a complex way, a higher way. You are called to join a much larger household than any family or tribe or nation. And the feast, made with Love, made by Love herself, just never stops. If you could see what Lady Wisdom is offering you, well, you'd chuckle at the simple ways of your past and step right up and take a seat.

One could suggest that we, the people of St. Bart's, are the servant-girls of Lady Wisdom, gathered in her house with, not seven, but four mighty pillars. Here we care for her house, inviting the simple into a larger life at a table like no other, until she returns.

But we mustn't settle for this sublime vision, you know. At least, if we are going to follow our Lord Jesus Christ, we are going to have to make our way with him through some tribulation first. Jesus loved feasts. He summoned them as if from nothing, feeding enough hungry people in one sitting to fill this space five times

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over; he could replenish a wedding with wine. But the spirit of these crowds had little interest in getting right with God and one another. They had little interest in entering into that larger life, that great heavenly banquet that could fill their spirits. They just wanted a leader who could fill their bellies, leaving them to their simple ways.

The people of Jesus' tradition, they all knew about Lady Wisdom's great feast. They all knew about holy bread and wine. They knew about the abundance of God's bounty. But Jesus just had to push them to their limit, taking the heavenly banquet to what seems like a completely dark and impolitic place. If you were to be a guest at Lady Wisdom's feast, what would be on the table? Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." This is a troubling image at best. And then, like a shock jock provocateur, he intensifies the image: "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat, unless you gnaw, the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." He also says that they will find eternal life in this. That they will be raised on the last Day of the Lord. And that in this eating, you abide in him as He abides in God.

It was a repulsive thing to say, perhaps intended to repulse. With Lady Wisdom, if you wanted to share in her banquet, you had to do something uncomfortable. You had to come to a place of humility. It reminds me of the first two steps in AA: you have to admit your powerlessness and then look to a power greater than yourself for help. Or in the language of the Book of Proverbs, to leave your simple ways, you had to admit you were simple and go from there. The only way out of your life and into that larger life is through humility.

Jesus has a twist on all this. Jesus tells us that if you wish to dine *with* him, you have to dine *on* him. You see, he is not going to sanitize reality for you. He is not going to avoid connecting how loving to the hilt in a world like ours is going to involve blood, sweat, and tears. Jesus emphasizes the blood, because his great love for us is going to be the occasion for his blood to be spilled, by us. He loves to the end. And all sorts of benefits come from this. We see what God is truly like in Jesus. But all wrapped up in this revelation of God in Christ is a revelation of evil in us and in our institutions. In the Cross, we see how we are willing to sacrifice each other for the so-called good of the many, when God does not desire those kind of sacrifices. God doesn't want us to kill for him. But we are set in a world where if we love as God loves, we may find ourselves dying for God's sake or for the sake of another person. Most likely it would not be that dire, especially in this particular society. But if we are to love as God loves, we will surely lose something. Part of us will die, part of us will no longer be ours anymore. But what is lost will become food for someone else, drink for someone else. Not literally, but lyrically. And it will be raised on the last day.

From one angle Jesus' imagery is disgusting. From another angle, his images clarify the true beauty of incarnate love. This insight equips us to walk through the valley of the shadow of ugly death and not to lose sight of the beauty of God in people. If we are going to eat this bread and drink this wine, and if we are going to claim it as Christ's Body and Blood, we are going to have to face up to the cost of love. And to meditate on why it is that way, on why we have made it that way. In this bread and wine, we see how vulnerable God has become for our sake, and how likely we are to attack God and God's messengers when they arrive. And in this insight, we can be saved from the hells on earth that we have constructed. Jesus sends out his servant disciples to the high places and invites us to leave the dark and join him at the illumined heavenly table in his Father's house with many mansions. His twist on Lady Wisdom's invitation is more like this: "You that are violent, lay aside your violence and live, and walk in the way of insight." The question for us is, is this an invitation that we will accept?

The marvelous thing is that we, you and I, are part of a community that is able, regularly, to handle the most striking of insights and have them be a basic part of our spiritual vocabulary. It is extraordinary. We can consume bread and wine that we claim as body and blood and not be particularly bothered. We can witness death's vivid, chilling power that can take up our entire field of vision, yet together rest in a larger life that is mainly hidden from view. Even at the grave we make our song of Alleluia. We can look at a crucified person and not see a disfigured monster, but instead see an avenue to God's heart and mind, and freedom from our demons and rationales of violence. We can look at an unbaptized stranger, and despite all the pressure from other quarters in our own church, we can see that they are just as undeserving of this bread as we are!

As my time with you, the people of St. Bart's, as one of your priests, as that time comes to a close, I find myself overwhelmed with gratitude. I found out, in short order, that if I were to properly count my blessings, when it comes to the good people of this parish and the good things that you and this place have taught me about God, well, I do believe I could be counting for as long as I had breath. I happened to find you while I was in seminary. They actually told me not to come here as an intern, because they said you were difficult, and I wouldn't be able to preach much! But I didn't listen, and I'm glad I didn't. Perhaps I was glamoured by your coquettish charm? And in that, I have been graced to dwell within a monumental community of love, which, among so many other valuable enterprises, at its core, resolutely shares this common holy meal feeding upon God's very self, together.

I have been blessed to serve among a cavalcade of distinguished, kind, and talented mentors and colleagues, indomitably striving to keep this holy place sustainable and vital. I have treasured preaching from this exquisite pulpit. And, oh, the music we have shared!

In a position like this, I've been with you for a goodly amount of time. And no matter the promise of a new chapter in my vocation, we have, indeed, shared so much. After all, "We who are many, are one body, for we all share in the one bread." And leaving you, frankly, makes me sad. But I know that this feeling is a sign of having found goodness in this world: a good place and a good people of love and wisdom working with God's help to be a blessing not just to me, but to thousands upon thousands of others. And now, on this day, my prayer of thanksgiving for you begins, a prayer that will be in my heart as long as it beats.

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